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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 001421

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: FRENCH CHARGE BRIEFS ON KOUCHNER VISIT,
DOWNPLAYS U.S.-FRENCH DIFFERENCES

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

1. (S) In a 9/14 meeting with the Ambassador, French Charge d'Affaires Andre Parant was at pains and obviously under instructions to play up the French-U.S. shared vision on Lebanon and to downplay any differences. He said that, while France hopes for a consensus president, France, like the U.S., does not accept compromise at any price. If necessary at the end, France will accept a president elected without a two-thirds quorum, although Parant questioned whether the March 14 would stay sufficiently united to have the absolute majority required. Regarding action in New York, he said that he would insist upon the inclusion of a phrase "free of foreign interference" in any UNSC statement, but he asked that, in return for his help on substance, we accept the French proposal on form. He argued for a press rather than presidential statement. Despite his emphasis on the U.S.-French partnership, Parant (please protect) also revealed (and then seemed to regret doing so) that Jean-Claude Cousseran might go to Syria and Iran soon (a bad idea at a terrible time, in our view) and that French Foreign Minister Kouchner would see Syrian Foreign Minister Muallim on the margins of UNGA.

2. (C) Reviewing Kouchner's 9/13 stop in Beirut, Parant described meetings that sounded to us devoid of substance (an impression confirmed by separate comments to us by Fouad Siniora, Saad Hariri, and Marwan Hamadeh). But in terms of atmosphere, Kouchner appeared to lean back toward March 14 perspectives, such as in his call for dialogue without conditions between the two political camps. Appearing relieved, Parant reported that Kouchner was annoyed at Nabih Berri's unrelentingly negative attitude about March 14's communique of the night before, when Kouchner (who had expected to have to pressure March 14 into responding to Berri's initiative) was pleasantly surprised with the communique.

KOUCHNER'S ANNOYANCE WITH BERRI:
THUS CORRECTION TOWARD MARCH 14?

3. (SBU) The Ambassador called on Parant on 9/14 for a

read-out about French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner's visit the previous day. Kouchner, accompanied by Special Envoy Jean-Claude Cousseron and aide Christophe Bigot, had separate meetings with Parliament Speaker Berri, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and MP Saad Hariri. He also hosted receptions in the imperial surroundings of the French residence with two separate groups: first, the participants of the July La Celle-St. Cloud talks and, second, a larger group of civil society representatives, including business and economic contacts who Parant said had been neglected during Kouchner's previous visits to Beirut. (Beirutis tongues clucked that, on the first night of Ramadan, the French served champagne to the mixed Muslim-Christian crowd.) Kouchner also gave a widely reported press roundtable.

14. (C) According to Parant, serendipity played a role in improving Kouchner's attitude about March 14. First, Kouchner had planned to force March 14 to respond at last to Berri's two-week-old initiative, and with a positive attitude. Luckily, March 14 had done so the previous evening, with a communique Kouchner liked. Second, Kouchner was late arriving to Beirut, which threw his schedule off. Berri, originally the third meeting, ended up as the first. Berri's single-minded focus on what he claimed was the negative attitude of March 14 annoyed Kouchner and colored his other meetings. Kouchner saw Berri's attitude as a larger problem than the March 14 attitude, and he even read aloud to Berri those parts of the March 14 communique that he found attractive.

15. (C) Berri insisted to Kouchner that March 14 did not recognize the risks he took in giving up the opposition demand for a national unity cabinet before presidential elections. Berri did not go through his normal clearance process, making his proposal without prior consultations with, or approval from, Hizballah or Syria. March 14 leaders ignore the trouble he created in the opposition camp

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vis-a-vis Michel Aoun. He expects March 14 to respond by accepting his proposal without modification. "You expect them to surrender everything?" Parant quoted Kouchner as having asked Berri. While the atmosphere in the Berri meeting was good ("remember that they have known each other for years," Parant said), Kouchner did not accept Berri's argument that, if his proposal is not accepted as is, Lebanon faces chaos. In leaving, Kouchner asked Berri to be positive toward March 14 in his interview later that night on LBC (a favor that, as Parant noted, Berri did not grant, although he did spare France from the vitriol aimed at March 14 and, to a lesser extent, the U.S.).

SINIORA, HARIRI ASK KOUCHNER
FOR MORE PRESSURE ON SYRIA

16. (C) Although Parant was too polite to say so explicitly, his read-out of Kouchner's session with PM Siniora sounded as though Siniora was delivering another of his pedantic foreign policy lectures given to visitors. Siniora did ask for additional pressure on France, repeating his now familiar formula that Syria should be forced to "pay in advance" for any engagement.

17. (C) As for Saad Hariri, Parant -- who met Hariri for the first time with Kouchner -- was impressed. Hariri made a very cogent presentation to Kouchner about how to use Berri. When Syria is under pressure, Hariri argued, then Berri can be effective. Berri tells the Syrians that he can get them out of the corner, and they give him flexibility to act. But when Syria feels it is not under pressure, then Syria pressures Berri. His room to maneuver vanishes. So the obvious answer, Hariri told Kouchner, is to increase the pressure on Syria, to allow Berri to move. Pressed on the presidency, Hariri said that he envisioned an informal selection committee, made up of three representatives from

March 8-Aoun forces and four from March 14-GOL. Kouchner saw immediately that Hariri's approach conflicts with Berri's vision of himself as king-maker. Yet Parant said that he had the distinct impression that Hariri and Berri, if not talking already "more than anyone knows," are already busily exchanging messages and messengers.

RECEPTION AND JOURNALISTS' ROUNDTABLE:
MESSAGE LEANED TOWARD MARCH 14

¶18. (C) Parant dismissed the two larger receptions as being only for show. But Marwan Hamadeh, separately, told us that, at the session with La Celle-St. Cloud participants, Kouchner made what the Lebanese thought was a revealing statement. Kouchner, addressing the group, praised the positive leadership of Nabih Berri and Fouad Siniora, speaking a little about each. Then he talked about the positive response of "my friends" from March 14 to Berri's initiative.

Except for Berri, he said nothing about the March 8-Aoun representatives, who saw where they now stood and quickly left the reception. Parant pointed out that Kouchner had made two very important points to the journalists: that France believes the two political camps should sit down together without pre-conditions (i.e., he adopted the March 14 position) and that France would accept a president elected with an absolute majority.

U.S-FRENCH STILL SINGING SAME SONG
ON LEBANON (BUT IN HARMONY, NOT UNISON)

¶19. (C) Turning to the broader French policy, Parant, referring to some papers in a file, said that he wanted to "correct the impression" that U.S.-French differences on Lebanon are growing. France and the United States might at times "sound different notes," but "we are playing the same music, with chords making our harmony more beautiful." It is not true that France is willing to sacrifice everything for a consensus president, he insisted. Yes, France wants a consensus president. Yes, France will work for a consensus president "up until the 14th of November" (when, the start of the last ten days of Emile Lahoud's presidential mandate, parliament is considered automatically convened to elect a president). In that regard, France will encourage the two sides to meet without pre-conditions.

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¶10. (C) But France will not sacrifice principles or allies in the process. If, in the end, a consensus proves impossible, France will accept a president elected by absolute majority, without the two-thirds quorum insisted upon by March 8-Aoun forces. "But we aren't encouraging (March 14) to move in this direction." (Parant, in an aside, questioned the U.S. reference to "recognizing" a president. "France recognizes countries, not presidents or governments," he said.) Noting the teetering allegiance of Mohammed Safadi and his Tripoli bloc, Parant questioned, however, whether March 14 would be able to muster the discipline for an absolute majority election.

NEXT STEPS: UNSC STATEMENT,
POSSIBLE COUSSERAN TRIP TO DAMASCUS?

¶11. (C) In terms of next steps, Parant had in mind the same schedule of events and meetings USG officials have been discussing internally. Regarding a UN Security Council statement, Parant said that he found it essential that the document include a reference to the elections being "free of foreign interference." That is the whole point of the exercise, he said, agreeing with the Ambassador that the absence of such a phrase would take on deep, unhelpful significance in Lebanon and Syria. He said that he would work to see that France supported including that phrase.

But, in return, he asked for U.S. help regarding the form. The French feel very strongly that the danger is too great that Emile Lahoud could end up in the UNSC chamber if the Council adopts a PRST. A UNSC press statement avoids the need for national delegations to be present.

¶12. (S) Also, Parant noted, Kouchner would meet Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallim on the margins of UNGA. The purpose would be to repeat the French message that improved bilateral relations depend on Syria staying out of Lebanon's presidential elections. Pausing as if deciding whether to continue, Parant (please protect) said that, while he does not wish to be quoted, it is possible that that Cousseran might travel again to Damascus and Teheran prior to Lebanon's presidential elections. The Ambassador said that he thought such a trip now would be a very bad idea. Regardless of Cousseran's message in Damascus, the impression will be left that Cousseran is there to discuss names of presidential candidates. No final decision has been made regarding travel, Parant responded, quickly ending the discussion as if regretful he had raised the topic.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) This was our second meeting with Parant, and he came across much more relaxed than in our first session and much more comfortable in explaining French policy in Lebanon.

He seemed to have been as relieved with Kouchner's message to the Lebanese as our March 14 contacts have been: Kouchner essentially adopted the March 14 position on Berri's initiative, that the two political camps should indeed meet, but in a dialogue without pre-conditions. And France's desire for a consensus president is understandable -- it is one shared by most Lebanese, after all -- but at least the French no longer seem to be pushing for a compromise at any price (although exactly where the line is located between acceptable and unacceptable concessions in the French mind remains to be seen). We guess by his frequent glances at his papers that Parant was also under explicit instructions to reassure us about the strength and value of the U.S.-French partnership on Lebanon, a message he had not underscored in our meeting a week earlier.

¶14. (S) On specific ideas, we find the concept of a Cousseran trip to Damascus now to be worse than ever, given that any such trip at this time will certainly be misinterpreted here as a discussion of presidential candidates. That is exactly the wrong message to convey as we are working to emphasize the need for Lebanon's presidential elections to be conducted free of foreign interference. But Parant does not want to be quoted on the possibility of a Cousseran trip. So we recommend that Embassy Paris and Washington inquire about Cousseran's plans in the period preceding elections, without revealing that

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Parant shared with us what seemed, thankfully, to be at this point preliminary thinking only.

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